Carsten Hermann-Pillath, Anneke Mulder-Bakker, Michael Nijhawan, Bernd-Christian Otto, Ioanna Patera, Ilaria Ramelli

Afterword: practices

How can practices generate, accelerate, or undermine the institutionalisation – or conventionalisation (see the Introduction to Part 2 of this publication) – of religious individualisation? This question, which we initially posed to our authors and which also underlies the first sub-section of this part of the publication, has three conceptual components – ‘practices’, ‘institutionalisation’, and ‘religious individualisation’ –, each of which are as ambiguous as they are multi-layered. It should therefore come as no surprise that the six papers assembled in this section will not present a conclusive answer. However, the insights gathered here, derived from different case studies and historical scenarios, are also far from arbitrary or trivial. They go to the core of the matter: how can processes of religious individualisation in all their ambivalence and intricacy (Otto 2017) acquire stability over time and become relevant not just for some select few but for a significant number of people? Are there cultural structures and strategies that help preserve for future generations those ideas, texts, practices, or sets of experiences that foster processes of religious individualisation, whether these processes are related to the enhancement of religious self-determination, the pluralisation of religious options, the development of elaborated notions of the self, the facilitation of deviance, or the realisation of intense ‘experiences deemed religious’ (Taves 2009), to name only a few potential facets? These questions have seldom been asked in a systematic manner, especially in relation to premodern contexts, as they seem to undermine the persistent stereotype of religious individualisation as an essentially modern Western phenomenon, a stereotype that often goes hand in hand with a sweeping ascription of a ‘public and collective character to premodern and non-Western religion’ (Rüpke 2016, 707). Pondering ‘religious individualisation in historical perspective’ thus forces us to re-read and re-think historical sources and the master narratives on cultural history alike and, ultimately, to change one’s thinking habits and perspectives.

In contrast to the authors of the second section of this part of the publication, who, in the realm of texts and narratives, rather think of ‘individualisation and institutionalisation as intertwined’ or even as ‘mutual, reciprocal and coeval’ processes, the focus on practices in the present section yields much more ambivalent results. Apparently, the notion of ‘practices’ opens a wide field of potential congruities, but also of discrepancies, between the notions of institutionalisation – or conventionalisation – and religious individualisation. We can think, for instance, of practices of social control or ‘power-knowledge’ (Foucault 1980) performed by religious elites

or even lay people in order to discipline or sanction dissenters, thus blighting their individualising tendencies (which may not even have been self-conscious). The more institutionalised such normative practices become, the more we might think of 'conventions' as basic cultural frameworks that foster de- or non-individualisation. On the other hand, we can also think of practices, such as ritual, that provide or enhance religious agency for individuals and groups alike. Such practices may also evoke intense, off-book 'experiences deemed religious', thus opening the floor for unusual and innovative interpretations of religious doctrines or ideas. Such novel interpretations may lead to the questioning of established religious traditions or institutions (on such dynamics, see also part 4 of this publication), and thus to individual or collective 'contentions', which may or may not result in religious reforms or even schisms. If there is a pre-theoretical 'logic of practices' or 'habitus' (Bourdieu 1990) that is not purely rational, instrumental, or purpose-oriented, then human practice also entails a chaotic element which may lead to undesired outcomes. In fact, much of the ambivalence that arises when pondering the seemingly counterintuitive composite 'institutionalisation of religious individualisation' results from the apparent un-controllability of the effects of (certain) practices: they may initially arise as attempts to heighten religious self-determination and agency but once they become ritualised and standardised they have the potential to undermine their initial impetus. The history of the Christian reformation, with its numerous schisms and sub-schisms, appears to be a splendid research field for studying such dynamics. The goal of this section is, therefore, to find those subtle in-between cases in which dynamics of religious individualisation become relevant for larger groups (i.e., not only for some outstanding individuals) and gather some stability over time, but in which dynamics of homogenisation, dogmatisation, and suppression have not (yet) led to backlashes into de- or non-individualisation.

Perhaps due to the complexity of such dynamics and the difficulty in observing them, none of the papers assembled here will present a clear-cut case of how it was historically – or could theoretically be – possible to institutionalise religious individualisation straight-forwardly by means of specific practices. The contributions rather highlight ambivalent cases, as they attest both the difficulty of (1) stabilising and conventionalising processes of religious individualisation in historical realities, as well as (2) detecting and analysing such processes from a scholarly viewpoint. Ioanna Patera, for instance, calls into question the recurrent claim that the Eleusinian Mysteries were one of the most individualistic facets of Ancient Greek religion. Apart from the individual decision to become an initiate (which was partly compulsory), we do not know whether there was even only one 'individual' element in the initiation procedure that was not shared by all other initiates – including the promised happiness in the afterlife, which may have been the same happiness for all practitioners. We do not know whether the

Mysteries arose as an attempt to provide individuals with enhanced control over their destinies. However, once the rites were established as an integral part of the cultic repertoire of ancient Athens (we might use the label ‘institution’ here), it seems difficult to detect even basic notions of religious individualisation in the surviving sources.

We encounter the same ambivalence in Ilaria Ramelli’s study of late ancient ascetics and discourses on slavery. To be sure, we can observe various facets of religious individualisation in her material, such as de-traditionalisation, an enhanced focus on the self and individual salvation, preliminary ideas of basic human rights and ‘dignity’, or the individual striving for intense ‘experiences deemed religious’ as a result of the ascetic’s focus on his or her own body, soul, passions, and intellect or ‘unified nous’ (Evagrius). Hence, the institutionalisation of monasticism in late antiquity might be considered an important landmark in the history of religious individualisation, and many later Christian figures and ‘mystics’ that have been said to embody high degrees of religious individualisation (such as Meister Eckhardt: see, exemplarily, Loser/Mieth 2014) indeed arose from monastic milieus. Yet, Ramelli also points to various de- or counter-individualising dynamics: consider, for instance, the stipulation of binding monastic rules, ritual standardisation, or the recurrent desire for tradition(alisation) in ascetic milieus. Does the monk or nun not strive for the stripping off of his or her individuality, becoming nothing other than similar with his or her humane brothers and sisters and, ultimately, God? This even pertains to slaves, for whom monasteries were among the few ancient refuges where they could be liberated from their owners without further ado. But did this liberation also liberate their religious selves? It seems that casting off the identity of a slave by becoming one of many ‘sisters and equals’ (to quote one of Ramelli’s sources) in a late ancient monastery is a rather de-individualising move, as one restrictive and compulsive cultural-religious framework is replaced by the other.

If we read Anneke Mulder-Bakker’s contribution with the same analytical lens, we again encounter social spaces – the *reclitorium* or anchorhold in the case of Juliana of Cornillon and Eve of Saint Martin, and the House of Souls in the case of Gertrude Rickeldey of Ortenberg and Heilke of Staufenberg – which facilitated certain degrees of religious individualisation for lay religious women in late medieval Europe. They could live an unusually private piety, mostly detached from the routines of contemporaneous church rites, develop an individual and partly innovative stance on theological matters, regularly engage in intense ‘experiences deemed religious’ without ecclesiastic (that is, male) supervision and restrictions, and even influence important (again, male) theologians of the time. We might interpret their monetary and educational background, their handing-down of spiritual insights over generations, their functioning as ‘exempla’ in later bio-

or hagiographies, and particularly the social place of the anchorhold / House of Souls as indicators of a – yet, limited – form of institutionalisation of individualised female religiosity in the late Middle Ages. However, again, ambivalence prevails: it was Aquinas' clergy-centred version of the Corpus Christ liturgy, and not Juliana's individual-centred version, that was institutionalised already during her own lifetime and became the standard ritual script down to this day. In other words, Juliana's attempt to promote a ritual procedure that might have had a strong individualising impulse for lay Christian practitioners clearly failed. In a similar vein, Gertrude and Heilke *did* influence Meister Eckhardt and other important theologians of the time, not least due to their extraordinary spiritual experiences. Despite this, they remain barely known, their work hardly studied even today, in stark contrast to the lives and works of some of the male theologians that they influenced. In fact, by becoming 'exemplary' (*exempla*), and thus normative, figures in later hagiographies, they were themselves standardised, and we can be fairly sure that eventual theological deviations from orthodox positions were eradicated over the course of this literary process. Mulder-Bakker thus suggests a differentiation between 'institutionalisation' and 'conventionalisation' when analysing female religiosity in the European Middle Ages (on this differentiation, see also the notes in the introduction to part 3 of this publication): whereas the first, in her eyes, 'hardly exists' in medieval times, the latter – understood as the formation of 'stable, formalized and recognized conventions and practices, which regulate and stabilize individual initiatives in societal forms' – was 'booming'.

With Carsten Hermann-Pillath's contribution, we move from 'Western' cases to the 'East', namely to modern China. So far, the notion of 'practices' has mostly been aligned with *ritual* practices but Hermann-Pillath's contribution places *economic* practices centre stage. Note, however, that much of what our author subsumes under 'gift exchange' was and is realised through ritualised behaviour, which thus forms one of the underlying motifs of this entire section. Hermann-Pillath's strategy to develop a concise theory of religious individualisation based on the religious market model (RMM) is perhaps the strongest attempt to substantiate the notion of 'institutionalising religious individualisation' in this section. In fact, while reading his analysis, both the theoretical and the historical parts (the latter being focused on modern China), we get the impression that religious individualisation is nothing but an inevitable side-product of any economisation of society, and that it is hard to avoid processes of religious individualisation in societal frameworks within which religious rights are granted to everyone and different religious traditions compete with one another. Even though the historical prototype of this scenario may again be modern Europe and North America (or even only parts of these regions), Hermann-Pillath claims that similar dynamics have been in play in modern China for quite some time,

tentatively extending the timeframe back to Imperial China. While his idea of two modes of exchange is fascinating, including regular back-and-forth movements between market exchange (individualisation 1: here, individualisation refers to the granting of religious rights, freedom, and choice between competing religious options) and gift exchange (individualisation 2: here, individualisation is primarily embodied in practices that have an expressive function, also in the sense of reaffirming the individual of her/his self and the social groups he belongs to), one wonders about relapses into de- or non-individualisation in the model presented here. Do certain dynamics of market exchange not undermine religious individualisation, for instance through the setting up of organisational infrastructures with all their powers of standardisation and dogmatisation? Hermann-Pillath provides a few observations on the matter but remains focused on processes of religious individualisation rather than de-or non-individualisation. Yet his model is a most welcome attempt to put some (in this case, economic) theory behind the idea of ‘institutionalising religious individualisation’ – a theory that may indeed be relevant to other scenarios, both premodern as well as modern.

Michael Nijhawan’s piece on Sikhs seeking asylum in post-1984 Germany shifts our attention to legal – or bureaucratic – practices, namely those geared towards controlling the residence, activities, and eventual deportation of asylum seekers in a modern nation state, in this case Germany. Nijhawan’s qualitative interviews with some of these seekers show in great detail how Kafkaesque bureaucratic necessities and procedures – such as the asylee’s frequent dependence on court orders, doctor’s certificates, police warrants, official notifications, work permits, or monthly visa-renewals – lead to a variety of changes in their religious practices and self-perceptions that correlate to processes of religious individualisation. In fact, the ‘precarious diaspora’ of these asylum-seekers, and particularly their constant fear of being deported, affects all aspects of their everyday life and routines, thereby leading to individualised perspectives on their participation in local Sikh communities (*sangat*), their performance of traditional rites (such as *nitnem*, the daily prayer), or on core Sikh doctrines (such as *Dukkh*, an embodied state of suffering and pain, or *Charhdi Kala*, the aspiration to maintain a mental state of eternal optimism and joy). In other words, even though Sikhism remains an important resource to Nijhawan’s informants in their daily struggles to endure the hardships of diaspora and asylum-seeking, it is precisely these hardships that foster certain forms of de-traditionalisation, creative re-interpretations of Sikh terminologies, or enhanced reflections on their religious self or selfhood. The latter finding, in particular, reveals a fascinating ambivalence, namely the asylee’s inevitably enhanced inclination towards ego-centrism and self-centeredness – obviously a psychological reaction to their perceived loss of social, political, and religious agency –, even though Sikh doctrines

traditionally focus on egoless states, the achievement of a non-dualistic self, as well as ‘being for another’. In the light of this finding, Nijhawan rightly points to general ambivalences in his case with regard to religious individualisation: even though there is a powerful institutional framework, namely German asylum law, that fosters certain individualising dynamics, the very same framework puts ‘stark constraints on religious agency itself’ (to quote the author). Yet, having a sufficient degree of religious agency at one’s command is, so we might suppose, a precondition for processes of religious individualisation. Nijhawan’s article also shows that dynamics of ‘institutionalising’ religious individualisation may originate in very different – and often non-religious – social spheres, such as, in this case, citizenship law.

Finally, Bernd-Christian Otto’s piece analyses the schism of a contemporary grouping of ‘learned magic’ (or ‘magick’, as it is usually called in modern practitioner literature), the so-called Illuminates of Thanateros. This schism took place in the early 1990s and is usually referred to as the ‘Ice Magick War’. Otto considers the foundation of the Illuminates of Thanateros in 1976/7 (and its re-foundation in 1986) to be a fascinating attempt at ‘institutionalising religious individualisation’, as the theories and practices of its main doctrine – Chaos Magick – are individualist to the core, thus yielding major tensions and ambivalences when implemented in the context of an organised magickal fraternity. Yet, the question of whether the Ice Magick War was an inevitable consequence of these ambivalences is not easy to answer, as history remains contingent and things may have evolved differently or deteriorated due to purely coincidental reasons. Nevertheless, the Ice Magick War illustrates the tension between a strikingly individualist, anti-hierarchical, anti-dogmatic agenda, on the one hand, and competing (group) dynamics of dogmatisation, authoritarianism, secrecy, and power abuse on the other – all this within a relatively small new religious movement which comprised, in the early 1990s, less than 120 members.

In sum, assessing and analysing processes of institutionalising (or conventionalising) religious individualisation with a focus on practices – particularly ritual but also economic or bureaucratic – is a difficult task that calls for nuanced assessments and a cautious eye on historical ambivalences and discrepancies. In fact, adopting such a nuanced perspective is inevitable in the light of the multifactorial complexities of historical realities, which rarely adapt to those neatly contrived theoretical models that modern scholars and historians tend to apply in order to make sense of their own worlds, as well those of the past. In this regard, the notion of ‘institutionalising religious individualisation’ may be considered an interesting, thought-provoking ideal type (an ideal type, according to Weber, is a mental construct [Gedankenbild] that, ‘in its conceptual purity [...] cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a *utopia*’; Weber 1949, 90), which,

however, turns out to be difficult to detect and analyse on a broader scale due to the ambivalences outlined above. However, it should be noted that this section only comprises a limited number of case studies and there are chapters in other parts of this publication – such as Martin Fuchs’ piece on ‘The Social Embedment of Individualisation in Bhakti’ (in section 1.2) or Jörg Rüpke’s article ‘Ritual objects and religious communication in lived ancient religion’ (in section 4.2) –, which seem to reveal dynamics of institutionalising religious individualisation in a more straight-forward manner. Yet it is, perhaps, best to embrace the placement of these chapters in different analytical sections in order to do justice to the multi-layered nature of this publication.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings; 1972–1977*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Loser, Freimuth; Mieth, Dietmar (eds.). 2014. *Religiöse Individualisierung in der Mystik: Eckhart, Tauler, Seuse*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Otto, Bernd-Christian. 2017. ‘Magic and Religious Individualisation: On the Construction and Deconstruction of Analytical Categories in the Study of Religion’, *Historia Religionum* 9 (2017), 29–52.
- Rüpke, Jörg. 2016. ‘Individualisation and Privatisation.’ In *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg, Steven Engler, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 702–17.
- Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious experience reconsidered: a building block approach to the study of religion and other special things*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1949. *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press.